

When the Sun Goes Down...

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Summary:

In the end, though, what did it matter?

So the Bowers gang were boys- thugs, hoods, bullies- during the day, and wolves that terrorized the streets of Derry at night. They killed cats, dogs, rabbits, birds, anything they could catch, and that was terrible, but-

But they now *knew* that Beverly knew.

1. The Part Where the Wolves Come

Author's Note:

In this AU, a human can only become a werewolf by killing another werewolf.

There was precious little to do in Derry after midnight. The shops closed, so to rob them would be too easy. The curfew ensued that everybody was long tucked away into their own houses, so there was nobody to bother.

Belch Huggins, however, had a car, and that made all the difference in the world.

They cruised to the outskirts of town, and sometimes beyond. Some days Henry Bowers drove, and then it was only he in the vehicle. Belch was with him more often than not, though. Less reliably were Vic and Patrick. There was a radio, though it picked up more static than stations, and the windows could be cranked down by hand. It tasted almost like freedom, or as close to free as anyone in Derry could really get.

Tonight was one of the rare occasions that all four young men were available, and so Belch drove, because he was the best at it, and because he, unlike the rest of them, actually had a driver's license. That his parents had purchased the Trans Am for *him* and him alone was irrelevant. The toll for Henry's respect and protection (if only from himself) was this: absolute loyalty, ferocity, and obedience. It was a toll Belch shouldered without question.

"The moon is full tonight," Vic observed, because Vic was the type to notice what was happening in the skies and what was happening on the ground with the green and growing things.

"Oh, better watch out," Henry said sarcastically from the passenger seat, where he had his legs propped up on the dashboard. "Something might come out of the shadows and eat you."

"Not funny, Henry," Vic mumbled, and glared when Patrick turned

his too-wide smile on him. He liked it better when Henry drove, and he could sit in the back with Belch. Belch, he was fairly sure, was the only one of his friends who actually liked him.

They drove a few more miles, until they reached the woods, but stopped when Patrick announced he had to take a leak. They watched him stroll off into the trees.

Henry stepped out of the Trans Am too, to stretch his legs and light up a smoke, so Vic cautiously popped his door open and sprawled across the back seats, watching him.

"I got something on my face?" Henry asked, after a few minutes of being stared at. Vic's pale ears flushed.

"No," he muttered, and looked at the dirt below his hands instead. "You just look cool when you smoke, is all." It'd been the first thought to come to mind, and it was true, the way Henry's dirt-streaked cheeks hollowed, and his long hands cupped the flame, the red cherry at the end the brightest thing in these dark woods. Vic had never taken to smoking himself; it made him cough.

"That's real deep. You gonna become a faggy poet too, someday, like your dad?"

It was a question he didn't expect an answer to. The sound of a sea breeze moving through hundreds of tall oak trees was eerie, and the calling of night birds didn't make it any better. Vic shivered, and smiled gratefully when Belch draped his big, warm coat over his back. "Thanks, B."

Patrick's moon-pale face peered out at them from between the trees, his eyes wide with excitement. "*Guys!*" he hissed, beaming bright. "Come look at this!"

"What, did you gut another raccoon?" Henry asked disdainfully. "I swear, you freak, nobody finds that as interesting as you do."

If Patrick was insulted by this accurate dig at his character, he didn't show it. He merely shook his head. His hair was so black that it seemed to disappear in the forest that enveloped him, like it was

eating him alive. The thought made Vic uncomfortable. Surely Patrick didn't mean for *them* to enter the creepy woods, too?

Evidentially he did, because with a snort of derision, Henry dropped his cigarette and ground it underneath his boot before striding forward. "Fine, but you're walking in front of me. I don't trust you not to kill us all and hang us for the birds."

"That's fair," Patrick agreed jovially. Belch got up a minute later and followed, ignoring Vic's protests.

"Oh, hell," Vic dithered. Which was worse- *going* into the creepy woods, or staying just at the fringes all by himself? There weren't even keys in the ignition; Henry had stuffed them in his pocket. If Patrick *did* kill them all...

He scrambled out of the car, leaving the door wide open, and ran after his friends. It was so dense and soundless among the trees that he doubted much sunlight touched the floor even in broad daylight. He almost ran past them entirely, but a hand snapped around his chest and drew him close, pressing a clammy hand to his mouth. That was *not* a position *anyone* wanted to be in with Patrick Hockstetter, so Vic froze, reminded of the sound that violins in horror movies made at jumpy moments. *Scree!*

"There," Patrick whispered into his ear, his hot breath smelling like licorice. "Do you see it?"

Vic struggled to make out what had caught Patrick's attention. The sooner they saw it, the sooner they could leave. His eyes adjusting to the darkness, he made out a prone shape. A hunched back; pointed ears; a long, bushy tail...

"Is that a wolf?" Henry asked. Vic hadn't realized he was so close.

"I think so. It's sleeping. Can't you hear it breathing?"

"It's *huge*," Belch remarked dubiously. "Wolves don't get *that* big. It has to be something else. That thing has to weigh what, two hundred, two-fifty pounds?"

"Whatever it is, we should probably go before it wakes up."

Vic agreed with Henry. He reached to try and pull Patrick's hand off his mouth, but-

"I'm going to kill it."

"Oh great idea, Patrick," Henry snorted. "Yeah, have fun getting your head ripped off. Let's get out of here."

"No, really!" Patrick said earnestly. "I think we can do it. Do you have your knife?"

"Yes, but-"

The next moment happened so fast that Vic couldn't believe what was happening, let alone that it was happening to *him*. Patrick shoved him bodily forward, so hard that he collapsed to his hands and knees, face-to-face with a wolf that was definitely not sleeping anymore.

"Distract it, Vic!" Patrick yelled.

Vic's entire body had frozen up; his arms were like stone pillars, not even feeling the needles and burrs of the forest floor piercing his palms. A small noise left his mouth, like air escaping a tea kettle. "Hhhhhhh..."

The wolf growled, low, ears pinning back against its skull. Its eyes were silver golf balls in the almost absolute darkness. Its nose twitched, sniffing Vic. It's hot, wet breath bathed its face. "Oh, shit..." he whimpered, his stomach twisting itself in knots.

With a yell, Belch cut in front of him, forcing the animal back with a heavy kick aimed at its face. Surprise made it flinch, and then Belch had Vic around the waist and was hauling him forcefully away from the thing. It gave chase, but was stopped when Henry, from out of nowhere, slammed it across the back with a thick tree branch.

Its forelegs buckled and it made a high bark of pain. Vic had had a dog once; a golden retriever-mix he'd loved with all his heart. She'd made a sound like that on the day she'd had been hit with a car. Stupid Patrick; if they'd just left it alone, it would have returned the favor. This was so *unnecessary*...

Belch continued drawing him towards the car, but the wolf, now over its momentary disorientation, continued to chase the moving target. With paws the size of dinner plates, it knocked Belch off his feet.

He fell painfully on top of Vic, who scrambled to get away, then froze when he heard Belch scream in pain- and then the sound of *tearing*. It had sunk its teeth into the meat of Belch's back and was-

Vic couldn't see what happened next, but Henry's loud grunt suggested another swing of the branch. Then Patrick began to *laugh*.

"Get a good taste of me?" he said breathlessly. Twisting out from under Belch's bulk, Vic sat up in time to see the wolf biting hard onto Patrick's arm, twisting its great head to shake Patrick's long scarecrow body like a ragdoll. Patrick never responded to pain like a normal person; he hardly seemed bothered by it. Instead, the white gleam of his smile was visible as he unsheathed Henry's knife and drove it up through the underside of the beast's jaw.

It released him as it screamed, long and horrible. The hairs on Vic's arms stood on end. That scream sounded almost *human*. Before it could recover (the pattering sound of its blood raining on the ground was distinctly audible) Henry leapt onto its back, dragging its head back by its ears and baring its long throat for Patrick. They were moving in tandem, like pre-colonial hunters bringing down a season's worth of meat for their families.

Vic was no hunter. He averted his gaze, burying his face in Belch's shoulder, as Patrick dove in with the knife once more. He felt Belch's huge hand settle on the back of his neck, holding him close.

The choking, gurgling sounds continued long after that- far too long. Vic finally pulled from Belch's arms and turned to see the wolf, its throat a black, spurting slash, as it trembled and shook on the ground, eyes rolling in agony. Patrick was watching it with his mouth hanging open, eyes vacant, pupils blown wide. He always looked like that while watching things die.

Henry was off to the side, stripping out of his shirt to touch the three parallel gouges over his ribcage; it'd gotten him good with a swipe of claws.

"You two are sick," Vic spat, angrier at them than he could ever remember being. He stripped out of his own shirt as well and dropped to his knees in front of the wolf, feeling the pooling blood all around stain the knees of his jeans.

"It'll be over soon," he told it, and held its long snout closed with one hand, bunching the fabric of its shirt over its nose with the other. There was no saving it, but leaving it to suffer was more than he could bear.

It whined and struggled as he smothered it, but only faintly. Vic was blinking back tears by the time it fell still, hot blood still dribbling sluggishly over Vic's hand.

Then he sat back, just staring at it. He felt numb and exhausted after all the tumultuous emotions and panic he'd experienced that night.

But the night wasn't done with him yet. He jerked back with a yelp as the body of the wolf rose- unnaturally so, like it was being drawn up by a puppet string on its neck. Its head lolled; its paws hung limp. Then, as all four boys stared, disbelieving, at the dead animal, it began to Change.

The structure of its head shortened and blunted; a muzzle pulling back to a nose and lips. The forehead broadened as the ears shrank, dull and pink. Claws fell away into blunt fingernails; hair receded to reveal long, muscled limbs. Its spine lengthened as well, straightened, until the creature was bipedal instead of quadrapedal.

When the Change finished, a naked man lay on the ground, curled in the same dying position as the wolf, though the wounds they'd left on it had closed up into thin white lines marring the tan skin.

Henry was the first to move, rolling the man's head to the side and checking his breathing, his pulse. "Still dead," he said dismissively, and dropped the branch he'd used as a club.

"He's a *werewolf*," Vic said breathlessly, eyes huge in his pale face. "We just killed a *werewolf*. What does that mean for us?!"

They felt it already, their own Change settling over them, sharpening

their senses. They could hear secrets whispered in the trees, feel the light of the moon bathing over them like a physical weight. One by one the scents of the forest were revealed to them: small, frightened creatures all around them; in the trees, under the dirt, filled with blood and panic. The green scent of things growing; the smell of gasoline from the nearby Trans Am. Even farther were the scents of the town; of human life. And there was the stink of wolf, everywhere around them. *Inside* of them.

Patrick's Change came as easily as walking from one room and into another. One moment, he was a boy crouched and holding his bleeding arm to his chest. The next, he was stepping through shadows: elongated and dark as a night without the moon, a single white star marking his chest. He was tall and skinny, his fur so black it was almost blue. His mouth was wide and, as he yawned, revealed row upon row of jagged teeth. He looked perfectly at ease in this new body, as though he'd been waiting for it all along and it was only natural he wear it now.

Henry watched him, eyes hooded, and then stood. The muscles in his back rippled and shivered with tiny spasms as he shucked off his pants and shoes, forcing his own wolf to the surface with a pained effort that had him grunting between clenched teeth. His wolf was violent, tearing its way out of him, wrenching muscle and crunching bone until at last a sturdy, sand-colored wolf stood in a pile of Henry's clothes. When he looked at his friends, they all instinctively looked down, feeling a power radiating from his burning eyes.

He turned to watch Belch shake off the last of his own humanity and loom, huge and bear-like, over them all; fur a gray-brown brindle that made him almost invisible when he slunk between the trees, only the golden eyes gleaming through the foliage giving away his location.

Victor struggled the most emerging from his human skin. The other three stood in a circle around him, protective and curious, as he twitched and shivered on the ground, his eyes wide and feverish in pain. He seemed to be fighting the transformation.

Henry growled and nosed at his cheek and neck, causing him to whimper in fear, but even wearing a human face, Victor could not

deny the call of his Alpha. He curled in on himself and the skin along his back split; wet, silvery-white fur spilled out.

He twisted, and in a moment paws replaced hands and ice-blue eyes gleamed out from a snowy-white face. He pinned his ears and tucked his bushy tail under his belly, groveling low and submissive as Henry loomed over him, awaiting a verdict.

Then Henry grinned a wide, wolfy smile and nudged him playfully. Yipping in relief, Vic's tail wagged as he appreciatively licked Henry's chin, then allowed himself to be lured away by Belch, who bowled him over. They barked and carried on joyously: wolves forgetting their human selves and playing instead in the pure, simple joy that was a full moon overhead, and big, young, strong, bodies, and a forest of things to sniff and chase and catch.

When Patrick bent to sniff at the body of the man, they all knew what he was going to do. It was neither surprise nor disgust that filled them when he took the first bite, though Henry did snarl a warning that made their fur stand on end. *Henry* was Alpha. *Henry* received first pick of their pack kills, and if Patrick defied that natural order, there *would* be a fight.

Unabashed, Patrick stepped back, but he defiantly kept his gaze on Henry, licking the blood off his own muzzle with a swipe of his long tongue. He seemed almost amused by this whole debacle, as though he only bowed to Henry's authority because he felt like it; not because he had to. The growl this ripped from Henry's throat was fearsome indeed, and Vic crawled to him on his belly, whining, as though to apologize on behalf of Patrick's insubordinance.

After a moment, Henry turned to the body and split it open from naval to throat, burying his face in the steaming entrails that spilled out. After that, it was a free-for-all.

Their howls filled the woods.

Victor awoke, feeling perfectly rested, when warm golden sunlight bathed his bowed back and naked buttocks. He stretched his paws- no, not paws, hands!- in front of him and yawned hugely, realizing

with pleasant surprise that he was again in the backseat of the Trans Am. More than that, he was curled on top of Belch Huggins, who had an arm slung around his waist, cuddling him close.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so content and at ease with the world; it was as though last night had shaken off every stress, restriction, and worry he'd ever held, and he was now free to just exist as he was.

He nuzzled into the crook of Belch's neck, because he was warm, and he smelled like the woods, and because Vic *wanted to*. He'd always wanted to; he'd just never allowed himself to even think on the possibility before.

Belch smiled, his eyes still closed, and brought a hand up to pet Vic's white-bleached hair, his blunt fingernails lightly scratching.

"G'morning," he whispered, a sliver of brown eye peeking up at him from beneath thick, dark eyelashes.

Vic smiled so hard that his dimples became canyons. "Hey."

Their momentary peace was interrupted by approaching voices. Familiar voices. *Pack* voices. Patrick and Henry bickered loudly, like usual. Henry, because the entire world annoyed him at all times. Patrick, because annoying Henry was one of his favorite pastimes. They, too, were naked, but they carried bunched fabric in their arms. Evidently, they'd returned to where they'd been to fetch everyone's clothing.

Vic considered them for a moment, how they stood yelling at one another; Henry's face twisted in a scowl, Patrick's in a wide smile; then he turned his attention back on Belch. There were more interesting things than the turning of the tides, the rise and set of the sun, the arguments of two stubborn boys.

He traced a hand over Belch's chest, admiring the structure of his frame, astounded at how small his own body was in comparison. Belch dwarfed him in every way.

"I'd like it if you fucked me," he said, because it was true, and because

Belch was Pack, and because he no longer feared the repercussions of either.

Belch's smile was too sharp to be entirely human. "I thought you'd never ask." His hands ran down Vic's back to his ass, which he kneaded and squeezed appreciatively.

"Ooh," Vic moaned, eyes squinching shut in pleasure and fingers clenching his friend's shoulders. He spread his legs until he was straddling him. He had a belly full of animal meat, and Belch's teeth sinking gently into his throat, and in that moment, nothing else mattered in the world.

Outside the Trans Am, Henry Bowers threw the first punch. Patrick caught it easily in his larger hand and used it to drag his Alpha closer, disrespectful and proud of it. When he kissed Henry on his scowling mouth, it became a knock-down, drag out fight in the grass and the dew.

When fighting gradually, predictably phased into fucking, their moans and snarls eclipsed the sounds from the rocking Trans Am.

So this was what it meant to be animals in human skin.

2. The Part Where the Bad Comes

Derry was a frightened prey animal at the best of times, always waiting for the next excuse to curl up and hide.

When the wolves came, nobody was surprised. Perhaps they should have been, but finding dead and half-eaten housepets next to bloody paw prints on city cement night after night- and the *howling* that went from sundown to sunup- the residents simply set an earlier curfew, lured the outdoor cats back home with bowls of treats, and dealt with it.

For Beverly Marsh, however, the nightly mournful howling as the impossible beasts wandered the blocks of the town, from the Welcome To Derry! sign at one end to Neibolt street on the opposite, kept her up with her heart pounding.

It wasn't *fear*- it was hard to be afraid of something that shouldn't be real when she was all bundled up in her bed and so far away from it all- but it was *something*. If she'd had to describe her feelings in a word, she might have said *longing*.

Sometimes they moved together, the monsters that haunted Derry, and sometimes they split apart. Sometimes they didn't come at all, stayed farther back in the forest when the supply of puppies to swallow and rabbit hutches to raid dwindled and fell extinct.

Not tonight, though. Tonight, they were so close that the hair on her arms stood on end and she pressed her back to the corner her bed leaned into, squeezing her legs to her chest and holding her breath.

The window of her and her father's second-story apartment faced the street so, when the howls seemed right on top of her, she twitched her curtain to peer out. Many kids had claimed to have seen the wolves, but she didn't believe them. Surely they were ghosts; spirits- she *had* to see for herself.

Winter was coming. The world was cold and gray, and frost pressed to the other side of her window, melting from the heat of her fingers on the glass and running like tears down the pane. At first she saw

nothing but the Laundromat across the street, lit up even at this late, closed hour, and the graffiti spray painted over its roof.

Then she saw one of Them.

It was like something on the cover of a fantasy novel; a wolf the size of a pony strolling the empty streets of Derry. Surely it was white as snow, but the light from the Laundromat stained it a deep, bloody red.

Perhaps it was because it looked so otherworldly, so beautiful, that she forgot how afraid she should be. She just had to get a closer look, one peek, that was all-

She slipped on silent socked feet to the door just past her father's room, half-convinced that to take her eyes off the creature for even a moment would cause it to disappear. She let herself onto the rickety metal stairs, bracing against the night chill, and circled the apartment- and there it was, real as life.

The wolf that stood before her was no ordinary wolf. The top of its pointed ears came up to her chin, and she was no small girl. Her mind turned to the dove she'd seen in the gutter: completely gutted. They liked soft organs, not bony outershells.

How easy would it be for this animal to tear into her like it had that bird?

It didn't look so frightening, though. It seemed more curious than anything else.

Feeling like something in a dream, she held her hand out. Catching the buttery scent of her palm, its black nose twitched, stark contrast to the solid white fur of its face. It wasn't tame- from its wild stink to the forest in its eyes, it was the farthest thing from tame she'd ever seen- but it wasn't *evil*, either. It just... *was*.

It stepped forward in a sinuous movement of paw lifting from ground and back leg following, and for a second, she felt its hot breath bathe her palm.

A nearby chuffing noise caused them both to look to the left. A larger

wolf-coat a sandy-brown, eyes a glowing cat's gold- watched them. This one did to Beverly what the other could not: it *frightened* her.

The white wolf whimpered, attention fully turned towards his companion. Their smell was stronger than ever. Oh, she was so *stupid* to come out here. What had she expected to happen?!

Beverly took a single step back towards the apartment, walking backwards, because she didn't dare take her eyes off either of them. The sandy wolf growled, and her heart beat so hard and so fast that she thought at any moment it'd break free of her chest entirely.

If she ran, he would kill her. She knew this with the same certainty that she knew fire was hot. Tears of fear formed in her eyes as she took a second slow step backwards, and a third. She yelped when he took a surging stride towards her, covering a huge swath of ground in one step.

The white wolf crawled- there was no other word for it, *crawled*- to the sandy wolf, eyes down, ears flat, tail tucked underneath his belly. He whined softly as he intercepted his path. When he'd reached the sandy wolf's front paws, he rolled over and tipped his head back, showing belly and throat.

He's begging for me, Beverly realized, feeling strange and heavy and slow, far too slow. Her hand flew to her mouth to restrain a cry when the snarling, sandy wolf snapped jaws like a steel trap around the white wolf's throat, biting hard with teeth the size and shape of jagged arrowheads. Droplets of blood welled in thick, snowy fur. He held on, while Beverly and the white wolf held the same breath, wondering if he'd tear the other wolf's throat clean out. She backed up, faster now, until she was nearly around the corner-

Then he let him go.

Two distinct howls- far, but not *that* far when you considered how fast they could move- carried over to where the three of them were stuck in limbo. It was that, and nothing else, that had Beverly sprinting up the stairs and back into her home, slamming the door closed and sinking to the floor with her hand still on the knob.

"Bevy?" her father's sleepy voice called from his bedroom. "That you?"

"J-j-just me, daddy," she replied, her chattering teeth making her stutter like Bill Denbrough. "T-there was a spider in my room, and I went to let it outside, but it scared me."

Apparently, this was a believable enough excuse that he didn't feel the need to leave his bed and investigate. "Well, get back to bed! The damn wolves are out again."

"Yes, daddy."

Beverly returned to her room, crawled into the safe corner where her bed met the wall, and stayed awake for the rest of the night and into the morning, shaking and listening to the howls.

As she did every day before school, Beverly Marsh left with her backpack and her bagged lunch, and walked all the way to the grocer before stopping and waiting, shivering a little in her thick Salvation Army jacket and debating whether there was enough time to smoke a cigarette. She never had to wait long. Her boyfriend, Ben Hanscom, jogged over to her on his stocky legs, a little out of breath but never the slower for it.

"You don't have to run," she reminded him, pointing to the watch he always wore. "We have plenty of time."

"But I wanted to *see* you!" he protested. She beamed and gave him her hand.

Outsiders would say they were an odd pair- such a beautiful girl with such a plump, homely boy. Those people didn't know Ben, sweet, intelligent Ben with his quiet humor and his heart of pure gold and his smiles that brought sunshine into her life when it became too dark. She felt safe with Ben, and loved. When he held her hand, her troubles seemed miles away. When he kissed her, her heart felt like poetry.

Or, so it usually did. Today, she had a *lot* to talk about with him. He listened in his quiet, thoughtful way as they travelled the eight blocks

to Derry's second-largest building (the town population was so small that the high school and middle school were jammed together into one red-brick building.) His grip tightened when she got to the part of the sandy wolf.

"I've seen him too," he said quietly. "There's four of them. That one, he's not the biggest, but-"

"But he's in charge," Beverly agreed quietly. "I could tell."

"Well, well. If it ain't the slut and her boyfriend Tits." The nearby drawling voice caused both teenagers to jolt, and consider running.

It was too late. Henry Bowers and his gang of cronies- Hockstetter, Criss, and Huggins- were leaning against the side of the Golden Lotus Chinese Buffet, red-nosed from the cold, smoking and leering their way.

Beverly found herself instinctively moving in front of Ben. Henry had hurt him bad when they were kids, carving the first letter of his name in Ben's stomach with his dad's buck knife. For this, she would never forgive him.

Ben patiently stepped around her and stood by her side, neither in front nor behind her. No matter what, whether it was bullies or her father, he would always stay beside her. "We're just going to school," he said. "We don't want any trouble."

"Who said anything about trouble?" Henry pulled his buck knife from his pocket and began cleaning his fingernails with the edge of the blade, grinning at the uncomfortable expression this brought to Ben's face. "You just run along to that school like the little sheep you are."

Patrick Hockstetter stared at them with his unnerving mad-sea eyes. If Henry was sporadically, horrifically violent, Hockstetter was flat-out nuts in a quieter, much more unsettling way. He could stare at Beverly, expressionless, for minutes at a time. Unlike when other boys stared at her, Beverly always got the impression he was imagining what her intestines looked like, rather than her breasts.

"If you keep skipping school, you're never going to graduate," she said

boldly, standing tall so that he knew she was not afraid of him.

Henry gave her a sharp look, his gray eyes catching the light, and Beverly froze. Had they always been so *very* bright? He smiled, wide and wolfish.

Huh...

The more she looked at them, the stranger they appeared to her. They were standing closer than boys, even long-time friends, ever did. Patrick was practically in Henry's lap and Henry's knife-holding hand was wound tight around Victor's neck, drawing his head underneath his chin, more possessive than brotherly. Beneath his wrist, Victor's throat was riddled with thin, white, triangular scars.

Bite marks. But whatever had made those bites had certainly not been human.

When one boy moved, they all moved, as though aware at all times of their special connectedness. Their heads tilted, canid. Their eyes blinking seemed synched. Was she looking at four boys, or one?

"What are you staring at, skank?" Patrick asked in his soft, raspy voice.

"Nothing. She's not staring at anything. Beverly, we need to go." Ben hissed, and she saw alarm in his bright eyes. She allowed him to pull her along their journey, but couldn't resist glancing, just once, over her shoulder.

Smiling widely at her, Henry dropped his face into the crook of Victor's neck and bit down lightly. His eyes never left her as he did so. Victor's blue eyes also rolled in her direction, and then she no longer suspected, but *knew*.

Oh.

"Ben..." she whispered, when they were half a block away. "You're going to think I'm crazy, but-"

He shook his head. "I know exactly what you're thinking. And I think you're right."

In the end, though, what did it matter?

So the Bowers gang were boys- thugs, hoods, bullies- during the day, and wolves that terrorized the streets of Derry at night. They killed cats, dogs, rabbits, birds, anything they could catch, and that was terrible, but-

But-

But they *knew* that Beverly knew. And she'd never say it aloud, but it intimidated her.

Henry had been taunting her with that bite to Victor's neck. *Nobody will ever believe you*, that look said. *What are you going to do about it?*

That night, as the far-off howls began, Beverly no longer felt enchanted, but angry. This was just so like them, spoiling and scaring the whole town for no reason other than they could.

She nearly jumped out of her skin when howling erupted right outside her window at ten minutes to midnight- one, two, three, *four* voices, beautiful and terrible and loud enough to make the things on her side table- a tube of lipstick, her little alarm clock, the framed photograph of her mother- dance and clatter from the vibrations. She clapped her hands to her ears and tried not to feel like a meal.

It went on and on, and then quieted; now only three voices sang to her. Gradually it became two, and then only one, long after the other wolves had gotten bored and left her behind.

The white wolf- Victor, it could only be Victor- didn't sound like that, so it was with great trepidation that she crawled from her bed to the window and lifted the barest hint of her curtain aside. She expected to see the sandy wolf again, but it was the tallest wolf- the black wolf- sat patiently below her window, nose pointed to the sky as he sang his heart out. There was something massed at his feet- something big.

He stopped singing abruptly and tilted his head as his eyes met hers.

Hockstetter. Of course it was Hockstetter. No matter what body he

wore, those crazed eyes remained the same.

He stood, still staring at her, then bent to pick up something at his paws. He lunged up the fire escape that heaved and creaked mightily under his massive size- she could hear screaming from the apartment below hers- and arrived just at her window, face-to-face with her.

The curls of fogged breath from his black, flexing nostrils steamed her window. Tiny, star-shaped ice crystals had formed in the thick fur around his eyes, his panting mouth. When he pulled his nose away from the glass, it left behind a smeared, mushroom-shaped streak of red.

Beverly had frozen, eyes huge, mouth open in a silent scream that would never come, as she waited for him to break through the glass, to land upon her, and-

He dropped the thing he was holding onto her windowsill, then slinked down the stairs as easily as a housecat, tail long as her arm flicking jauntily.

By the time her father burst into her bedroom, shouting and brandishing his shotgun, Beverly had managed to break out of her trance and scramble away from the window, a trembling hand pressed to her mouth, because Patrick Hockstetter had left her a human hand, a *man's* hand, dripping with drool and torn jagged at the wrist-stump with a white pipe of bone protruding out of the meaty flesh and a plain, gold wedding band on its fourth finger.

3. The Part Where the Pack Comes

"I can't believe you did that, Patrick."

"Fucking *moron*."

"That was beyond a doubt the *stupidest* thing you've ever done."

Patrick shrugged. His pale skin, streaked in smears of brown (dried mud and blood), was textured all over with goosebumps. He shivered, but did not cross his arms or move around or do anything a normal person might to alleviate the cold. Vic noticed the blue-purple look of his thorn-covered feet on the forest floor.

He'd burst out of his human skin so quickly the night before that all his clothes were about as functional as a handful of confetti, and therefore had to remain undressed while the other boys made to return to their daily lives. He wasn't complaining, but even looking at him was making Vic sore by proxy. His own damn *teeth* were chattering, and there was a long hike yet to reach the Trans Am they'd parked at the top of the hill.

Henry had no sympathy. "You did this to yourself," was all he said when he noticed the bloody footprints Patrick was leaving behind in the snow. Patrick did not disagree, nor did he stop looking deeply pleased with himself for the night before.

"Honestly, Patrick," Belch was still chastising practically. "You just... you can't *do* that. Sooner or later they'll send out hunters for us if you keep killing people and scaring the Marsh bitch. Probably sooner."

"So let them." Patrick looked a little too eager at the idea. Vic could just imagine it: middle-aged Derry men made bulky by parkas and scarves, envisioning themselves heroes as they chased four mythical beasts through the city streets with guns and fire. Patrick wouldn't run. He'd face them down, tear them apart like he had that old man so unwisely taking out his trash the night before. Shake them like dolls in his massive teeth. And sure, he could handle two or ten or a dozen, leaving orphans and widows to mourn, but eventually...

"They'll kill you," Henry declared. Fully dressed now, he still resembled his wolf alterself more than a human should. It was something to do with his slate eyes; the set of his jaw; the tilt of his head and the stillness to his expression. He was their Alpha, regardless of the skin he wore. "And I wouldn't stop them. You're too dangerous for this pack, Hockstetter."

Patrick tipped his head back and laughed uproariously; so loudly that the grackles resting in the dense, leafless trees around them startled and noisily took flight. He wiped his streaming eyes; thin, bare chest still heaving with chuckles. "Oh, Bowers," he said with great fondness and warmth. "I can't be killed. I made this world. It, the scared little humans, and all of you, are all mine."

Henry growled, eyes locking on his second. It hadn't been the first time Patrick's words had rankled his sense of authority. Vic hoped desperately that it wouldn't escalate into another heated dominance fight- he just wanted to go back into town, to alleviate the suspicion that would surely follow. *Four wolves killed an elderly man the same night that four strange boys went missing from their beds.*

Belch must have been thinking the same thing, because he shrugged out of his coat and draped it over Patrick's dirty body, then squatted down in front of him, arms extended back like wings. "Shut up and get on," he snapped.

Patrick smiled angelically.

Waking on the lumpy old sofa in the Hockstetter's garage had become increasingly commonplace for the four boys. It wasn't that their own families didn't want them anymore- though that much was obvious- but that they (or at least Vic) couldn't stand the fear in their eyes anymore. It made him too hungry.

Everyone could tell they were different. Their teachers and classmates had sensed it, so they'd stopped going to school. And as for his little sisters...

Vic didn't want to think about the fear-stink on his sisters' skin when he'd accidentally cornered them in the kitchen that one time, or how

much it had excited him. When had they stopped being family and become prey instead? He was losing himself more every day, and he hadn't exactly been a gentle soul to start with.

It seemed very much as though their lives would never be the same again, and he wondered whether it might be better to just strip off the last vestiges of his humanity entirely; let the four of them become nothing more than beasts in the woods.

Henry was closer to that fate than all the rest of them combined. Even now, as the sun was only just beginning to set, he'd already started pacing; agitated, uneasy, wishing for the cool soothing of the moon.

"Hank?" Vic tried uneasily. It was a childish nickname, something he hadn't used since they were pre-pubescent twerps skinny-dipping in the quarry together. It worked, though, drawing Henry's eye. Vic held out the Styrofoam tray of raw hamburger meat they'd stolen and been snacking on for the better part of an hour as a peace offering.

"Maybe we can just stay in?" he suggested, with little hope. "I just have this really bad feeling..."

Sure, the four of them might be even more irritable and snappish the next day without the relief of their other (*real*) bodies, but there were aspects of human life that Vic missed. Television. Spaghetti for dinner. Bickering and board games and warm clothes and Belch's fingers laced through his, the press of lips on foreheads. The ability to use *words*.

(The wolf is part of you, though. And soon it will be all of you. Always inside, snapping at the ropes of your guts and making the muscles in your arms and thighs tremble, your throat crying out parched and desert-dry for human blood. You'll never be rid of what you are.)

Henry snatched the tray from his hand and began loudly shoveling the dripping pink chunks of meat into his mouth with his fingers. His pupils were tiny black pinpricks in the winter-sky gray of his eyes. His teeth looked exceptionally sharp. His tongue, startlingly red, lapped up the remaining juice from the bottom of the tray, and then he tossed it aside. It just wasn't *enough*.

I'm losing us. Never mind Patrick; Henry is going to be the first that forgets how to be human. And why shouldn't he? When has human life ever given him anything worth holding on to?

Slowly, an idea was beginning to take shape in Vic's mind. He had to try, no matter how foolish, no matter how disastrous the consequences might be. Vic had maybe a quarter of an hour until the sun fully went down. Standing, he lifted Belch's keys from the top of the TV they'd set up in the garage next to the space heater.

"Where you going?" Belch asked.

Vic didn't want to lie to Belch, and he *couldn't* lie to Henry, so he instead looked at the fake potted plant in the corner by the door. "To get more hamburger," he told the plant.

"Hi, you've reached the Hanscom residence. We're sorry we can't take your call right now, but leave a message and we'll get back with you as soon as we can. Thanks!"

"Ben?" Beverly spoke quietly into the receiver of her landline telephone, grateful that her father was still at work and couldn't hear her. "Ben, I know you're at work right now, but I wanted to tell you that I'm going to try and stop the wolves tonight, and I don't want you looking for me. Vic and I think we have a plan-"

The fair-haired boy glanced at her from where he knelt in the kitchen, rooting through the meat drawer of her refrigerator, looking so out of place in his rich-boy clothes, and then returned to his task. She wondered how she'd ever mistaken him for human. His every movement was that of the calculated, unselfconscious twitch and hunch of an apex predator. It was a wonder the Bowers gang hadn't been found out sooner; they were about as subtle as a hammer to the face.

"- I think I have a fair shot at handling this, and you'd only get in the way and be in danger. I'm going to do my best to make everything okay again. But if I can't..." Vic glanced at her again when tears choked her voice. She bit down hard on her lip until the thickness in the back of her throat went away. "... If I can't, then I want you to

know that I love you very much, Benny."

Vic eyed Beverly as she hung up the phone. He was restless, and he stank. Not of normal body odor- no sweat or general teenage-boy funk- but something earthy and meaty and altogether unpleasant. Her nose wrinkled when he stood and loped towards her.

"That's close enough," she warned when she saw the swimmy ice-blue of his eyes flicker to silver and back again.

"You didn't mind my being closer the other night," he pointed out, but kept his distance as she'd requested. As much distance as was possible in the small, claustrophobic hallway that connected to the Marsh kitchen, anyway.

"That's because I didn't know it was you," she pointed out, recalling with a shiver how she'd stood outside, willing the enormous white wolf closer despite the fearful pounding of her heart. "If I'd known, I wouldn't have bothered."

"Okay, ouch. Am I really *that* bad?"

"You threatened my boyfriend with a knife. For no reason. He was *eleven*."

"In my defense, *I* didn't do that. I only held him down while Henry--" Vic saw that this was getting him nowhere, and wisely shut up as the teenage girl scowled at him, her furious face at odds with her puffy jacket and the comical, dangling blue pom-poms of her knit hat. "Anyway, I'm here saving your ass, aren't I? Now you know: Patrick wants to kill you. Probably tonight."

Her glare deepened; she crossed her arms over her puffy coat. "I assumed as much from the *dead man's hand* he left on my window yesterday. Don't pretend like this is some noble rescue. You got yourself into a heap of trouble and you want me to save you. Somehow. Me." She gestured to the length of her body. She was tall and strong, as far as young women went, but her meaning was clear: *one human against a pack of supernatural wolves*.

Vic shifted, whined a little. She couldn't have understood why, but he

had put himself lower than her height, avoiding her eyes. He was acknowledging her superior ranking. "But you'll still-"

"I'll help. But I'm not doing it for you. I'll help because I'm *not* going to cower from him. I don't care what he is; I will *not* be afraid of Patrick Hockstetter. I don't lay down and let anyone bully me."

"That's great." Vic was fidgeting rather a lot now; shifting his weight from foot to foot with growing anxiety in his eyes. The stink that hung around him like a fog increased in intensity, filling every corner of the shabby lower-main apartment. "Look, can we go outside now? I can't hold it together much longer."

She saw how his hands trembled, how his muscles jumped and danced as though he were shaking off a million invisible spiders. "Oh, hell," she sighed, and clamped two hands on his shoulders, pushing forcefully. "Go outside, behind the building. There's a spot by the garbage cans where no windows face." It was a good place for a smoke break, or for kissing Ben breathless. She knew it well.

"But you-"

"I'll be right there. Now get out!" she shoved him again, and he had to admire her guts. Not a lot of people would consider nonchalantly pushing a werewolf around. Maybe he'd picked the right rescuer after all.

He let himself out of her apartment and down the stairs, barely making it to the spot she'd indicated in time to shred his clothes and stand, shivering and goosepimpled, and wait for his skin to rent and tear and form something new.

Beverly, however, had raced to her bedroom, ignoring the police tape on her window as she stripped off her boots and stuffed her feet into more sensible footwear- running shoes. Behind her door, she'd hidden a hatchet stolen from her father's work vehicle the night before and now she slung it over her shoulder, its heavy weight deadened by the thick leather cover.

At last she strode into her father's bedroom, as always kept Spartan-neat, shabby only through their lack of finances; never a lack of care

or order. She bent and withdrew his hunter's rifle from under the bed and, after some thought, secured his belt of hunters' knives around her waist as well. A box of ammunition rattled comfortably in her pocket, and she tried not to think of the hell she'd pay when he came home to find these things missing.

"Alright," she said bracingly to herself. "Okay."

When she locked the apartment up after herself and stepped into the crisp night air, Victor, now in his wolf body, peered his huge white face around the corner at her. It was easier to like him like this, without his sly liar's eyes that smiled so cruelly as he bullied and tormented younger kids. Maybe some people made better animals than humans. He looked impassively at her, and she held out a palm.

Like on the first night they'd met, he approached in small, unsure steps, tall enough to come to her shoulder, the tips of his pointed ears reaching her chin. Unlike that first night, she took the final step and brought a hand to the dense fur of his face, her gloved fingers disappearing into the sea of white as she tentatively stroked him. He closed his eyes and allowed this touch.

Glancing down at the pile of clothes he'd left next to the wall, she saw the keys to the Trans Am gleaming on the top of his t-shirt, waiting for her. "Guess I'm driving, huh?"

"Where is he?!" Henry demanded, pacing violently around the garage. "He's too late. We need the car- I need it now, Belch!"

Belch flinched when the leader of the pack spun around to him for answers he didn't have. "Maybe something happened... maybe he got caught in a snow bank..." He tried to talk in a soothing voice, but his own rising anxiety prevented it. He knew Henry could smell it on him; it spurred his pacing to more frantic lengths.

"He didn't get caught. He *left* us. I'm going to fucking *break* him." A line of drool wound down Henry's throat; spittle from the force of his words. Belch had the bizarre, maternal urge to wipe it away, but didn't think that getting his hand bitten off would really help their situation, even if it would probably grow back after a transformation.

"Henry, you need to calm down," Belch said, and lowered his gaze respectfully when Henry whipped to face him, the gray in his eyes completely eradicated by gold. "You can't transform in here. There's not enough space, and Patrick's parents..."

Henry opened his mouth- oh, his teeth were sharper, too- to tell Belch exactly where he could shove Patrick's parents, when there sounded a very inhuman yip just outside the garage. Both boys knew that yip.

"Son of a *bitch*," Belch swore, and slammed his hand on the button that raised the garage, revealing Patrick's silhouette just outside- fur so dark he should have been invisible against the black sky, were it not for the white star on his chest and his gleaming, mad eyes. "Are you *crazy?! This is a suburban neighborhood-*"

There was a ripping sound behind him, and he turned in time to see Henry, kicking his jeans off as he frantically burst from his own skin in his effort to keep up with Patrick, all other logic having fled.

"Fantastic," Belch muttered sarcastically, rubbing a palm over the back of his neck in his distress. "Great, just great. You've lost your goddamn marbles and Patrick never had any damn marbles to begin with."

As if to illustrate his point, Patrick tipped his head back and howled boisterously, calling Henry to the hunt, the sound bouncing deafeningly off the cement walls and floor of the garage and forcing Belch to clap both hands over his ringing ears.

Henry had managed a partial transformation in full view of the entire neighborhood. This was all coming to a head; Belch watched in horror when, as if on cue, the rows of cookie-cutter houses' front lights flicked on. People filled the doorways, watching, waiting; ordinary suburbanites made sinister by waiting eerily still in the night fog: painters and teachers and doctors and secretaries and construction workers alike made warriors towards their common enemy, the wolves. The attractive little cul-de-sac of two dozen houses had quite abruptly become a battlezone, and they stood in no-man's-land, exposed, at last, to the world for exactly what they really were.

Their time, it appeared, had run out.

"Oh, shit," Belch whispered fearfully, heart pounding like a drum.

Patrick abruptly stopped howling and stood, thick tail lashing. Trapped between two wolves, Belch prayed for a miracle as the first brave soul ventured from his porch, a hunter's rifle slung over his shoulder, and regarded the trio with a deadly, merciless eye.

"Please don't shoot," he begged the man, who was already taking aim. "It'll only make them angry-"

As if to illustrate his point, Henry, all wolf now, growled low in his throat and sank his teeth forcefully into the meat of Belch's forearm. Muscle ripped; blood pattered by the cupful to the sidewalk, black and steaming in the chill night darkness. Belch bit back a groan of pain and only just managed to avoid sinking to his knees- this was Henry being *gentle*. If he'd wanted, he could have crushed bone. Belch felt his own wolf wake and threaten to rise, if only to protect himself. He fought it down stubbornly, knowing that that was what Henry wanted.

The man, face grim in cold determination, closed one eye and squeezed the trigger.

Patrick let out a little yelp upon impact of bullet into flank, but otherwise didn't seem bothered by it. He turned on the man and was at his side, crossing the entire street between them, in under two steps. The man managed to fire off another shot before Patrick was on him, and then there was only screaming, the gleeful, wet sound of ripping flesh and crunching bone, and then silence.

A second neighbor- this one to the right of the Hockstetters- let out a cracking retort of his own. *Pistol*, Belch's trained ear told him, and he suddenly and acutely missed his father. He hadn't known the man well, but he remembered the old man teaching him to shoot.

It was this very human thought that allowed him to keep his current form, if only for now. "Let. Go." he demanded into Henry's ear, though openly defying him made him tremble, nauseous to his core. "I'm trying to save you." If he could only rescue one of his present

friends, he knew which one he'd choose- which one might not be beyond saving.

He grit his teeth down hard on a second moan of pain and took a step away from Henry, then another. He felt the flesh speared by Henry's teeth start to rend, and Henry was left with the dilemma of releasing him or allowing him to harm himself- Belch honestly didn't know which he'd choose, and was almost shocked when Henry did indeed let him go, though he didn't look very happy about it.

"Thanks. Now stop. I'm not transforming right now, so quit trying to force me." He clutched his damaged arm to his chest, sickened by the sheer volume of blood that continued to spill from it. Soon his choices would be to transform and heal... or to collapse. Already he was feeling lightheaded.

"Come on," he grunted and, although it was unthinkable, he reached his good arm to Henry's nose, hooking two fingers painfully into his nostrils and dragging his face down until Henry yelped in discomfort and anger. He growled, bared his teeth, tail lashing-- but shockingly did not harm his friend any further. The Alpha stepped down and allowed himself to be guided.

As if in a dream, Belch pulled him along while the streets ran with gunfire and blood, using Henry's bigger and more durable body as a shield from the crossfire that was now razing from all directions. His ears rang with the bedlam of close-range shots and screams and snarls and shouted orders.

Patrick was having the time of his life, flinging human bodies left and right, leaving a trail of carnage wherever he went, heedless of the bullets and buckshot that peppered his hide. He'd wanted this from the start and was tired of being held back.

Belch felt a strike of shock to see Patrick's parents standing side-by-side in their front picture window, faces grim, still as scarecrows as they watched their only living child butcher the neighborhood. They'd probably known all along. Belch had to look away.

Henry whined, wanting to join in the massacre, allured by the downward spiral that was Patrick Hockstetter's patented cocktail of

madness. Belch redoubled his grip on the beast, anchoring him down to reality. "No!" He said firmly. "You may be a crazy bastard, but you're still my friend. I'm choosing you. You're making it to the woods if it kills me!"

He almost lost his tentative control over the other boy when a bullet grazed his chest and a starburst of white-fire pain startled a cry out of him. His knees really did buckle. If he just gave in and transformed, he'd be much safer crossing this seemingly-endless stretch of street exploding on either side with gunfire, but someone needed to keep their head.

Henry, clearly furious at some outsider daring to lay a hand on one of *his* wrenched his head free and roared his fury into the face of a nearby neighbor, who fell back onto his ass, a dark wet stain spilling down the leg of his pants as he whimpered piteously and covered his face.

"No!" Belch repeated, wrenching Henry's face back down to his eye-level. "I said no! Now *keep fucking walking!*"

Henry kept walking, though his massive paw prints now left bloodstains on the pavement; he'd been hit himself now, and multiple times.

Fast-approaching headlights to the right were all the warning they got before a car- *Belch's* car- fishtailed in front of them and slammed to an abrupt halt, breaks squealing, the smell of gasoline only hyping up the adrenalin of the fight. Glass on a back window cracked as a bullet ricocheted off an opposing house and into the vehicle.

Vic came back! Belch, delirious, thought in some relief- before realizing that, while Vic was indeed crammed painfully in the car, the driver was someone else entirely. Though their face was obscured by a ski mask, Belch thought he recognized the scent. *Oh, that crazy little genius. What did he go and get her for?!*

Beverly Marsh regarded the boy and the wolf for one long moment, and then she was zooming off again, narrowly avoiding barreling down the group of people swarming Patrick. Vic watched Belch and Henry mournfully from the cracked back window.

Belch at last gave up on maintaining the shape of a human. It was such relief to let his wolf body come bursting forth; he felt stinging bullet fragments pop free of his thigh and new skin forming over his many injuries until he was whole and strong and focused on a new purpose. *Follow Vic.*

He was taller than Henry in this body, though he still pinned his ears back and crouched respectfully when he regarded his leader.

Henry looked at him, then at the receding taillights of the car. Then he turned to look at Patrick, now missing an eye (clear jelly around the socket made his dark fur shine) but clearly having the time of his life as he waved an unstoppable path of destruction. Belch saw what Henry wanted, and a very large majority of him wanted it, too: the siren-song of blood and power. With the three of them working together, the neighborhood wouldn't stand a chance. They'd kill every man and woman on the streets and then start on the houses; drag children from their beds; rend Elders into pieces in games of tug-of-war; a regular Bacchanalia of violence and terror and gore. They could...

No. That's not what we are. That's not what pack is. Pack is safety. Pack is bond. Pack is brotherhood. Pack is... Vic.

Belch whined, nuzzled his face into Henry's, licked at his chin. *Don't you remember me? Don't you love me? Don't let him take you, too.*

Slowly, unhappily, Henry came to his senses. He gave a shake, his sandy fur looking gold under the streetlights, and took his place in front of Belch, running away into the night, following the scent of gasoline and Beverly Marsh and Victor Criss.

It was so hard to think like this, when everything inside him was fighting it. Henry didn't *want* to think. He just wanted to Be.

But Belch, damn him, big Belch with his brindle fur and his trusting eyes, kept drawing him back. *Come on, Henry*, his whines and tugs insisted. *Come on. We still have work to do.*

So Henry followed, feeling less and less like an Alpha every minute

he did so. The pack boundaries, as they were, were crumbling. Patrick had knocked the tower they made right over on its already unsteady foundation and now nothing made sense anymore. Who lead? Who followed? And did it even matter? All was chaos.

He could only continue putting one paw in front of another, barely feeling the pain of multiple gunshot wounds; though they bled profusely, they were like the bites of ants; trivial.

They ran through Derry, and every home they passed, from the great sprawling mansions on the hills to the trailers by the canal, to the lower end apartments, to the farmhouses where people like the Hanlons' and the Bowers' lived, all had their lights on despite the late hour. People watched the wolves that had so terrorized them, guns at the ready. It felt like the whole town was waiting to see what happened next.

At last they were on the ascending dirt road they'd driven on so many times, but this time the scent of gasoline they chased was fresh, as was Victor's. Where was the Marsh girl taking him? Why was he *letting* her?

It became presently apparent that they were being followed, and brief relief eclipsed Henry's hardened heart. Patrick had come to his senses after all. They'd all converge together and... what, exactly? What happened next? It didn't matter, it only mattered that they got there—wherever 'there' was. He pressed faster, gaining on the taillights in ever-decreasing distance.

Beverly was slowing the Trans Am, yanking her ski mask off and coming to a halt at last on a bend in the road when the trees of the forest became so dense that she could drive no further. She stumbled from the seat, weapons in hand, and popped the back doors, guiding Vic out of the car (he had to squeeze quite a bit). He hadn't much liked driving, had whined the whole way like a dog being taken to the vet, and the moment he was free he gave a mighty shake, loose white fur flying and filling the air. He sneezed aggressively multiple times and gave Beverly a reproachful look.

"Hey, this was *your* idea," she pointed out. He did not look impressed by this reminder.

She could see the wolves approaching; Henry and Belch neck-and-neck, and further back, something dark and foreboding that seemed to slip in and out of the shadows. When the ground under her feet rumbled, she thought it was a little like standing with her back to the treeline and waiting for a stampede to bowl her down, smearing her to a pulp on the road. Despite her resolve, the urge to panic and hide was rising. She laughed to work off some excess energy, shook out her hands and stood in a fighters stance with legs apart and shotgun in hands. "You ready for this?"

Vic did not think he was ready, but he forced himself to step in front of the girl, sitting with his tail coiled neatly around his feet, and waited for the others to reach them.

Henry nearly overshot and had to dig his back paws down hard, skidding on the road. He was barely winded, even after running so many miles at top speed while injured. He growled, consternated, confused, frustrated; and butted his head hard into Vic's neck, nipping and snuffling and examining. Vic allowed it, chuffing reassuringly. *I'm fine. It's okay. I'm here.*

The brindle wolf, overjoyed to be with Vic again, practically danced to him, shimmying and wagging his tail, lowering to his forelegs playfully before bouncing up again. Vic yipped, playfighting back before licking his chin, cheeks, ear. Belch sneezed in play-disgust, but his tail was still wagging. It was oddly sweet; had Beverly not been so stressed, she might have smiled.

"Guys," she warned, The brindle wolf was so big that, were she to sit astride his back, the soles of her feet wouldn't so much as skim the ground- and she had pretty damn long legs. Each of his exposed teeth were about as long and thick around as her thumb. He absolutely dwarfed Vic by comparison.

"Damn," she mumbled. "Belch, is that you?"

It had to be. The sandy wolf currently eyeing her in mistrust was Henry.

"I don't know how much you guys can understand me," she said. "But I *am* here to help you. So if you could, like, *not* eat me, that'd be just

awesome."

They did not respond. Their collective stares were beginning to make her twitch. Had Vic set her up for this?!

And here came Patrick now, gnarly and limping and leaving a trail of blood as he ran, his remaining eye gleaming. *Fuck, fuck, fuck...* she was so *fucked...* How stupid had she been to ever trust Victor Criss!

But as she observed the tense, absolute stillness of the three wolves around her, as Patrick stood on the opposite side of the dirt roads with the mountains to his back, she wondered if she may have misread the situation.

One stood against four in a classic standstill, with only the wind in the trees moving Beverly's coppery hair from her ponytail.

Nobody moved as Patrick slowly started advancing closer. For the three wolves, it was simple: a shared history of almost two decades of friendship. For the only available human, it was a strong desire for the night to end without any further violence.

Then Patrick snarled, and crouched low to spring.

Beverly's first shot flew too far to the left, barely grazing him. She swore, her cold hands fumbling to reload the weapon. The sound of the gun set everything into motion, too breakneck paced for the eye to track.

Belch, as the largest of them all, barreled towards Patrick's blind side first, knocking him back, his meaning clear: *you are no longer welcome here*. If he had a voice, he might have tried to explain: *Patrick, buddy; you make us all crazy. You make us reckless. You'll get us all killed. You're bad for the pack*. As it was, he had only his actions to speak for him.

The first few blows were his. He drove Patrick back, fighting dirty; hitting him where he was most injured. But Patrick was patient and sly, playing off his wounds more than he felt them. He faked a fall and, when Belch leapt triumphantly upon him, Patrick shot up, going straight for the lower belly. He sank his teeth into the exposed,

vulnerable, near-furless flesh, and the scream Belch released was terrible to hear.

Belch was panicking, flailing, feeling fangs pierce his delicate organs. It was unthinkable that Patrick should *hurt* him- him! His longtime friend!- so very terribly, with such obvious intent to kill. He couldn't wrap his mind around it. He didn't want to die, not like this, not at the hands of a friend!

Vic dove in defense of his mate, wrapping his front paws around the indent the blades of Patrick's hips made and biting savagely at the flesh of his back, his spine. It was hard to get a good grip- all four of them had incredibly thick, deflective fur- but he tasted blood before he was flung off.

Belch followed Patrick when he turned towards Victor, attempting to drag his attention back- pack hunting tactics of tag-teaming- but was knocked so hard into a young oak tree that a crack split it from trunk to lowest branches and sent a heavy sheet of snow flying down. He struggled to stand, then collapsed chest-first back into the snow.

Then Patrick had Victor by the throat, wrenching him back and forth and digging a paw between his shoulders as the smaller wolf choked and gagged; eyes rolling, blood flying.

"Stop it!" Beverly demanded, and fired off another round. Though this shot sank home, he barely reacted to the bullet stabbing into the meat of his thigh. It was about as effective as the suburbanites firing at him- which was to say, not very.

Vic was trembling, sinking to his forelocks, rapidly losing consciousness. If something didn't change, he would die. A wolf that turned on his pack was a rogue; a dead wolf walking. Henry watched all this in wide-eyed confliction. He was Alpha. It was his job to put rogues down. And what was more, *Vic's life* was on the line. It was his duty to step in. And yet still he froze. *Patrick...*

Belch, recovering from his collision with the tree, shook his body out and returned to the fray just as Beverly disgustedly tossed the near-useless shotgun aside, trying to find a way to creep closer.

Belch sank his teeth into Patrick's scruff, using his size advantage to rip him away from Vic, who collapsed, wheezing and shaking, onto the leaf-strewn ground and curled into a red-streaked snowball.

Beverly approached at a snail's pace, waiting for a chance to strike as Belch and Patrick grappled, fighting to the death. It was a thunderous battle, both parties silent now; no energy reserved for growling or posturing. It was crushing jaws snapping in deadly efficiency at vulnerable faces as they rolled over the snow and crashed into trees. She was so afraid that she thought she might vomit, but held it back; it wouldn't help her any.

At last Patrick heaved Belch onto his back and threw himself atop, back claws raking at an already damaged belly, attempting to fully eviscerate his once-friend. Beverly gave a running leap and threw herself onto the black wolf's back. She raised her father's hatchet and, with all the strength in her body, slammed its blade between his shoulders, hacking into his spine; grabbing onto a fistful of his fur with her free hand to stay astride him as she did so. His lower body abruptly fell slack, slumping onto Belch, paralyzed and useless to him,. He released a short bark of alarm.

With grim determination, Beverly climbed, hand-over-hand, all the way up the length of his back. When he turned, neck sinuous, snaky, Belch leaned up and sank his teeth into the front of Patrick's throat, holding him still. Deathly calm now, Beverly pulled the longest knife from the set strapped to her waist.

When Patrick's remaining eye rolled to look at her, she slammed the blade of her knife into it-- directly into his brain, feeling boiling-hot blood and viscera spurt over her hand, coating it from fingers to forearm.

Patrick did not die quickly. When he at last ceased his jerking and flailing, by the time his death rattle sounded, Vic had recovered enough to approach them.

Belch patiently waited until Beverly had climbed back down from the heap of wolves before wriggling out from underneath his fallen friend. Henry had eyes only for Patrick, but Vic and Belch both turned to stare expectantly at the girl.

One moment there was a girl, and the next, a wolf of about the same size as Victor; but while he was a solid snow-white in color, she wore ruddy red on top with a fluffy, cream-colored underbelly. She was lovely even in her massive, fang-bearing force of will.

She snarled, and Belch found himself crouching, tail tucked under his belly, in the face of such ferocity.

She turned on Vic next, charging him, and he too cowed, acknowledging her authority. *Slayer of the rogue*. Once she saw that she had their respect, her demeanor softened and she offered the both of them a wide canine smile.

Henry stood tall, barely quivering as she approached him slowly, methodically, until they were barely a handbreadth apart.

Belch watched in fascination as the disgraced leader slowly, reluctantly lowered his ears and accepted his new Alpha, tilting to lick placatingly at her chin. Her tail whipped playfully, and she butted his shoulder with her forehead.

And just like that, the uncertainty that had filled the pack these past few hours was resolved, neat and smooth. A new hierarchy had been formed in their dynamics, but it was reassuring and concrete. They once more knew what they were, where they belonged, and could all breathe again.

Beverly approached the body of Patrick Hockstetter, no longer wolf but all boy, and nosed delicately at him, rolling him onto his back and snuffling into his hair.

Henry whined so loudly that they all looked at him. He ducked his head, shifting from paw to paw. He knew it was Beverly's right, that it was *expected* of her to eat her kill, but the ever-receding part of him that was still human, that still *felt* human things, resisted the idea.

Beverly cocked her head, more dog than wolf, and then pointed her nose at a star. She howled, high and clear and lovely- not the triumphant bray of a feln conquest, but rather the mourning song that signified the death of a pack member.

Henry's head shot up, startled, and he stared at her.

Belch joined in her song a moment later, and then Vic.

Finally trusting that this was no mistake, Henry added his voice to the group's, lovely and eerie both; a wolf's funeral in the black woods.

Beverly woke, naked but not cold, in the snow-frosted glen of the woods. Warmth pressed her on all sides; thick, breathing, living warmth. When she stretched and inhaled, she could just make out the sickly-sweet smell of new death, the process of rot slowed to a crawl by the frozen landscape. *Patrick.*

When she sat up, a golden eye opened, regarded her with animal curiosity, and closed again.

Beverly smiled softly and reached to press a palm to the cheek of the one who had once been called Henry Bowers.

There was no more boy in this wolf, and maybe it was better that way.

Henry leaned, content, into his Alpha's hand, before returning to his deep sleep.

Beverly felt a pang of envy that Henry would be able to live out his life entirely as a wolf. There were so many struggles and challenges awaiting her in the human world just an hour's drive away. Things she didn't want to face- but had no choice. Someone had to do damage control. Someone had to stop the human population of Derry from perusing the wolves deeper into the woods.

"How about you?" she asked, and her breath left her mouth and nose in cloudy puffs as it met the brisk air, nudging the white wolf to her left. A tail flickered, and silver eyes opened.

No. Though Victor was more aware of himself than Henry, this too was a solid wolf's gaze. He yawned hugely, laved her upper arm with his long tongue, and settled his chin onto her thigh.

Turning, feeling her icy heels pressing into her backside from the way

she was sitting, Beverly at last stroked Belch's nose. When she shifted her head, she heard the rustling of dead leaves in her long, messy hair and smiled, knowing she must look half-feral; naked and muddy and covered in leaf debris as she was. "What about you?"

Belch's eyes, thank God, were sharper than either of his companions. He whined when he saw what she was asking of him.

"I know, I know. But please. Think of your mother, Reginald. Doesn't she deserve to know that you're alright?"

There was another whine, but after a prolonged and difficult struggle, Belch climbed from his wolf skin and emerged, pink-cheeked from the sharp air, back into the world of humans.

"Thank you," Beverly told him in sincerest gratitude. "I don't think I can do this alone."

He sighed. "Let's go find your clothes," was all he said, standing and holding out a hand to pull her to her feet, which she accepted.

The wolves watched as she dressed, gathered her weapons, and handed the keys from her pocket to Belch so that he could get some spare clothes from the trunk.

"You guys will be alright," she told Henry and Vic. "We'll come back when we can. I don't know how much longer Belch will be able to stay human, but I'm sure he'll be returning to you a lot."

They didn't react. She hadn't expected them to.

She looked back at Patrick's body, still and silent and unblemished as a fairy tale, eyes closed and palms turned, open, to the sky. Snow ran down his bluing cheeks like tears, melted from the rising sun.

"What should we do with him?" Beverly asked Belch when he returned to her, his large boots leaving heavy prints in the thinning snow. "Take him back to his parents?"

"No." He said this so firmly that there was a touch of wolf in his growl, in his intent brown eyes. "They don't deserve him."

"But he wasn't-"

"Pack? No, I guess a rogue wolf couldn't really be pack. But we loved him anyway, especially Henry. As much as old Hank could love anyone." Loved him almost enough to forsake his pack when they needed him the most.

Belch shrugged, after a small pause, and smiled wryly. "I mean, you could *try* to take him if you want, but I don't think Henry would let you. Just let the woods take him, Beverly." Into the moss and the leaves and toadstools and all the things of the forest that lived and died and became other things with little fanfare.

"Okay," she agreed. "Do you want a minute to say goodbye?"

He shook his head. "They know I'll be back." He indicated the sleeping wolves with his chin, though there was more than a hint of longing in his eyes. He wanted to be with them- to run wild, to forget he'd ever had two feet instead of four paws.

"Okay," Beverly agreed and, finding herself missing the intense, overwhelming closeness of pack once more, she took his hand as they returned to the Trans Am, temporarily leaving one life behind in the woods to fill their roles in another.

Boy. She had so much to tell Ben.

~ *Fin* ~